

# **Will Gandhi's political ideas contribute to the future structure of our world?**

**Remarks by Philip McDonagh at the Malayalam/Kerala Cultural Association Conference on Martyrs' Day, 30 January 2025**

## Introduction

Thank you very much for the invitation to speak to you this evening. I am especially glad to join Bobby McCormack of Development Perspectives on this platform. In Kerala, the Hindu, Muslim, and Christian traditions are strong. The Jewish community have lived unharmed in Kerala for 2,000 years. In addition to its religious pluralism, Kerala's political discourse includes Marxist politicians whose worldview is not expressed in religious or spiritual terms. Kerala is famous also for its educational standards and its connections to the wider world. The Malayalam/Kerala Cultural Association is an excellent venue for Irish and Indian friends to look together to the future.

The great Irish peacemaker John Hume was awarded the Mahatma Gandhi peace prize in 2002. John dedicated his speech to the following question: 'Will Gandhi's political ideas contribute to the future structure of our world?'

This evening I hope to respond to John's question focussing on three points:

1. Gandhi would want us to have an effective non-violent strategy for change
2. A Gandhian strategy will always make room for the personal and therefore for our faith or worldview or sense of the sacred
3. To gain a Gandhian perspective on politics we must focus on the needs of the most marginalised

The *principal contradiction* in today's global politics is that humanity is increasing its productive and destructive capacities without there being an equivalent development in the realm of conscience and mutual understanding. The Gandhian strategy that I will seek to outline would seek to address this contradiction. I will argue that Ireland and India can become partners and pathfinders in a new culture of encounter and new forms of public diplomacy.

## Gandhi as a strategist

What distinguishes Gandhi from so many other spiritual leaders is his acute understanding of politics and strategy. In the face of today's cascade of global crises defying analysis and forecasting, Gandhi would have wanted us to develop an effective strategy for change, a *satyagraha* global in scope, pluralist in terms of participation, and non-violent.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are intended to represent a vision of the global citizenship of nation States and a medium-term common plan for humanity. But the SDGs are incomplete as a roadmap to the planetary future, and to say the least, their delivery is far from being on target. The development agenda, whatever form this takes post-2030, can benefit from a new ingredient, a carefully constructed *culture of encounter* as a catalyst of transformation.

Peace and good governance depend on values such as trust, loyalty, justice, mercy, solidarity, and hope. But we cannot legislate for trust. We cannot engineer friendship. How then do we identify our most important cultural resources and interpret, clarify, and nurture our high-level values? How do we nurture the perspective that enables us to make good decisions from day-to-day?

My first Gandhian proposal is that public authorities should create new spaces or assemblies within which to enable a wide range of parties and stakeholders to reflect on the medium-term future. This work should focus primarily on our social model, our vision and our values – and only secondarily on specific policies. The gradual development of an *effective public truth* or *shared philosophy* through a *culture of encounter* is an extension of the policy planning concept with which governments are already familiar. It does not call into question governments' ability to defend immediate interests in day-to-day negotiations elsewhere.

## A sense of the sacred

A Gandhian strategy will always make room for the personal and therefore for our faith or worldview or sense of the sacred. Gandhi's political campaigns were supported by prayer meetings accessible to people of different faiths. A multi-stakeholder or multi-sectoral coming together to reflect on the medium-term

future should include the representatives of churches, faith communities and philosophical organisations.

For many-sided negotiations to bear fruit, personal interactions are a prerequisite. Diplomats must have the freedom to undertake exploratory discussions with counterparts with a view to understanding their points of view, the dangers they fear, whether they consider that changes of position can occur, and where they see the possibility of new beginnings. In other words, we expect diplomatic contacts to enable the interaction, not of physical, but of moral systems. This requires us to bring words and their real meanings into play. The ‘personal, human level,’ including especially trust, becomes all-important.

A sense of the sacred changes our understanding of the relationship between ends and means. To quote John Hume in his speech on receiving the Mahatma Gandhi peace prize:

Too often we are tempted to fall back on the utilitarian principle that the end justifies the means. Mahatma Gandhi turned this around. The ideas of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* suggest that it is the quality of the means – including our readiness to suffer for good ends but not to inflict suffering on others – that provide the justification of the ends.

There is more to nature than what we measure scientifically – on the contrary, there is a depth, a purpose, and a beauty that is not ours to give or take away. To accept even as a working hypothesis that the earth and its creatures are in some sense ‘given’, or sacred, will have an important impact on our approach to environmental questions.

Reverence is a virtue that is relevant in wider circumstances. In a well-known episode in ancient Greek history, the city-state of Athens holds back from executing a certain group of prisoners because the act is perceived as *ōmon kai mega*, ‘cruel and unusual,’ and therefore less than human. The same idea is present in English when we speak of the ‘enormity’ of certain actions. There are times when the sheer scale or ‘outlandishness’ of a proposal renders it humanly unworthy. Reverence or a sense of the sacred can often guide us to the right moral choice more reliably than the invocation of abstract principles.

## Gandhi's 'talisman' and the need for perspective

My third Gandhian point is that to gain a true perspective on politics we must focus on the needs of the marginalised. For Gandhi, *swaraj* of the least powerful – the self-determination of the poor – is the touchstone, or 'talisman,' of political progress. Gandhi's option for the poor is reflected in the social principles of India's constitution. It is present in the SDGs in the formulations: 'no one should be left behind' and 'reaching the last first.' 'The poorest and those most in need' are central to the Document on Human Fraternity signed by Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ahmed el-Tayeb in 2019. Gandhi's talisman can be characterised as a moral compass or common criterion of evaluation applicable in a wide variety of circumstances.

Our Centre in DCU recently conducted a multi-stakeholder project on food systems which arrived at the following Gandhian conclusion:

*A values-led approach to politics and security in the perspective of 2030 or 2050 should give an over-riding priority to sharing the primary goods of life while also accepting a longer-term responsibility to promote the ecological and climatic conditions on which life depends.*

## Towards a new form of public diplomacy

The expectancy behind my three Gandhian recommendations is that if the engagement of public authorities with faith traditions becomes our compass, the global political journey will veer in the coming decades towards the 'true north' of solidarity, sharing, stewardship of the planet, and *swaraj* for the most vulnerable – and will do this palpably, in ways that people will find compelling in terms of their lived experience.

Here is another quote from John Hume's speech in 2002:

For [Gandhi], our political strategies must address the plight of the less fortunate and the dispossessed not as a by-product of, or sub-text within, some overall formula for success but directly. I am struck by a metaphor employed by a modern [Gandhian] writer, Arundhati Roy. Roy identifies

our tendency to give weight to the concerns and sufferings of some groups while we fail even to see or measure the sufferings of others. An equation of this kind she eloquently describes as a moral algebra [that distorts the truth.]

Roy contrasts Ambedkar with Gandhi. But the point remains that in anthropological or civilisational terms, our most urgent task is to avoid a false algebra and to affirm *the possibility of an effective shared truth*. In a pluralist global society, we need to embrace the commonality underlying our differences (important and inevitable as these differences are); to frame our differences in such a way that we continue to understand one another; and to see ourselves at some level as companions on a shared journey. We can enhance the Gandhian strategy that I have proposed by means of a new form of public diplomacy involving civil society in Ireland and India.

### Ireland and India

The potential resonance between the Irish and the Indian perspectives can be understood with reference to several Irish leaders.

Alfred Webb was a Quaker and pacifist. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, his family were well-known campaigners against slavery and imperialism. Webb combined support for Irish Home Rule with a global vision that was far ahead of its time. He opposed the opium trade as damaging to both India and China. In 1888, he co-founded the world's first journal dedicated to the study of racism and caste. In 1894, when Gandhi founded the Natal Indian Congress, Webb was invited to serve as President of the Tenth Indian National Congress in Madras.

On 20<sup>th</sup> February 1920, Eamon De Valera, delivered an address at the India Freedom Dinner at the Central Opera House in New York. A number of phrases from this speech are worth quoting:

Patriots of India, your cause is identical with ours ... The great moral forces of the world are with India and with Ireland today ... The rule of a people by a foreign despot is a terrible thing, but the rule of a people by a foreign democracy is the worst of all, for it is the most irresponsible of all.

De Valera discusses the post-World War One Peace Conference in Versailles. De Valera's vision is that the great powers of a century ago were avoiding the most important global issues of the time.

In his acceptance speech on receiving the Mahatma Gandhi peace prize, John Hume states the following:

For me and my colleagues, in the generation that bore the wounds of two great European wars, it was easy to hear Gandhi's words. As we defined our political strategy of non-violence, respect for difference, and working together in the common interest, we found ourselves giving expression to something resembling the Gandhian conception of *satyagraha*.

There are many other pioneers of Irish–Indian dialogue, including the poets Yeats and Tagore and Margaret Noble, Sister Nivedita, who worked with Swami Vivekananda. The social principles in India's constitution are partly modelled on the constitution of Ireland. So how can we turn our affinities to advantage in today's global confusion?

In his speech on accepting the Mahatma Gandhi peace prize, John Hume made some comments that have a great deal in common with what the current Indian Foreign Minister, S. Jaishankar, describes as 'civilizational diplomacy.'

Here are John's words:

Europe was not always made up of nation states. Like this continent [of South Asia], it was at one time an area of shared culture in which political allegiances took multiple forms. As a member of the European Parliament, I am a witness to the re-emergence of a Europe in which the territorially based nation state is no longer the sole unit of measurement and questions of sovereignty and territorial definition have been to a degree 'relativised'.

In his book *Why Bharat Matters*, published in 2024, the Foreign Minister of India, S. Jaishankar, outlines a vision of India as a 'civilizational state' combining cultural beliefs and a modernizing agenda. In a recent State of the Union address (September 2021), the President of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen,

makes a similar statement about the European Union. Citing Vaclav Havel, she describes the European Union's values as having 'come from the cultural, religious and humanist heritage of Europe.'

Minister Jaishankar's vision is that India, with its democratic ethos and inherent pluralism, can aspire to the role of 'consensus-builder and voice of reason in a polarized world.' The motto of India's G20 Presidency in 2023 was 'One Earth, One Family, One Future.'

Beside India, Ireland is very small. But Ireland stands in, at least to some degree, for the European Union and for a European civilisational space that stretches from Vancouver to Vladivostok. Inspired by Gandhi-ji and John Hume, and as a form of public diplomacy, our Centre hopes to set up a space of shared reflection to explore the relationship between the European Union/Europe and India/Bharat through a civilizational lens, while also seeking the lateral roots that connect us to other civilisations, especially in the wide space between South Asia and the Eurasian landmass and in Africa.' A deeper dialogue within what Atal Bihari Vajpayee termed 'the framework of humanity' can begin to capture the imagination of the younger generation and to encourage them to participate actively in democratic politics.